

DAILY BULLETIN

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U.S. TEAMS UP WITH NBA TO PROMOTE CHILDREN'S HEALTH

Proceeds from professional basketball games to benefit children worldwide

By Eric Green

Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a U.N. health agency, and the professional National Basketball Association (NBA) are teaming up on a promotional campaign to protect the health of children in the United States and around the world.

The United Nations' Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) said that proceeds from the December 15 NBA game in Washington between the Washington Wizards and the Miami Heat will be used to support the efforts of EPA to promote children's health and protect them from environmental pollution.

The campaign is exemplified by the words of NBA players quoted in a PAHO public service announcement: "keep pesticides and chemicals out of reach" of children.

"I love being healthy. Protect my environment. The ball is in your court. Make it happen," says an NBA player in the announcement.

PAHO said another NBA game -- a February 9, 2005, event between the Wizards and the San Antonio Spurs-- will be played with the theme "Youth Violence Awareness Game Night." The goal is to reduce youth

violence in communities in the United States and internationally.

A third NBA game -- scheduled for April 9, 2005, between the Wizards and the Philadelphia 76ers -- will have the motto "Maternal and Child Awareness Night." PAHO said that "Healthy Mothers and Children" is the theme for World Health Day 2005, to be celebrated internationally April 7, 2005.

In a December 10 statement, PAHO and the Wizards said they wanted to use basketball as a "platform to engender the health-prevention and healthy-living habit as a part of everyday living." Because they are both based in Washington, PAHO and the Wizards said they made the "natural choice" of joining forces to promote the message of "health awareness each day."

EPA's efforts to protect children's health in the Americas include the North American Commission for Economic Cooperation, which involves the United States working with the environmental ministers of Mexico and Canada on a cooperative agenda regarding asthma and lead poisoning, and making a risk assessment of environmental factors harming children.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, EPA launched a partnership with the United Nations, civil society, and governments around the world aimed at developing indicators for children's environmental health. Partners in this endeavor included the U.N. Environment Program, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, Physicians for Social Responsibility, the International Society of Doctors for the Environment, the International Network of Children's Health and Environment, and the countries of Mexico, Canada, South Africa and Italy.

More information about the PAHO/Wizards/EPA partnership is available online at:
<http://www.paho.org>

FIRST U.S. SARS VACCINE TRIAL OPENS AT NATIONAL HEALTH INSTITUTES

Researchers produced vaccine 21 months after virus identification

Powerful research tools that speed up vaccine development led to the December 13 start of human tests for a preventive vaccine against the respiratory disease severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

According to a December 13 press release from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), researchers at the NIAID Vaccine Research Center will conduct the trials.

SARS was identified first in China in November 2002. The virus had sickened 8,096 and had killed 774 worldwide by July 2003, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). SARS was brought under control with epidemiological investigations, patient isolations, quarantines of exposed people and stringent restrictions on travel.

The experimental vaccine will be tested on 10 healthy volunteers at the NIH Clinical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. The clinic will do periodic follow-up exams on each volunteer for 32 weeks. The main goal is to determine if the experimental vaccine is safe in people.

A secondary goal is to assess how well the vaccine stimulates the immune system to produce antibodies and cellular immunity.

The sudden appearance of SARS, its severity, and its ability to be spread far and fast by international travelers spurred medical researchers. NIAID researchers developed the vaccine within 21 months of the virus' identification. It often takes decades for scientists to develop a successful vaccine against an infectious disease.

Under a contract with NIAID, Vical Inc. of California is producing the SARS vaccine for the clinical trial.

Information about the NIAID is available at <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/>

The World Health Organization offers information about SARS at:
<http://www.who.int/csr/sars/en/>

Text of the NIH press release follows:

National Institutes of Health
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
Press release, December 13, 2004

First U.S. SARS Vaccine Trial Opens at NIH

Powerful research tools that speed up vaccine development have led to the start today of human tests for a preventive vaccine against the respiratory disease SARS. The disease killed hundreds of people around the world before it was brought under control in 2003 with aggressive conventional public health measures.

Researchers at the Vaccine Research Center, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), will conduct the trials. The experimental vaccine against SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, will be tested on 10 healthy volunteers at the NIH Clinical Center in Bethesda, MD. The clinic will do periodic follow-up exams on each volunteer for 32 weeks.

"This experimental vaccine is an outstanding achievement by NIAID researchers," said Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson. "It is a model for research that could greatly shorten the time needed to create vaccines to be tested against other diseases."

"The Vaccine Research Center, a cutting-edge facility established here at NIH just five years ago, encompasses the entire spectrum of vaccine development from basic research to clinical testing," says NIH Director Elias A. Zerhouni, M.D. "This is why our team at NIAID has been able to develop this vaccine at an unprecedented pace, using technological discoveries that were not available just a few short years ago."

The primary goal of the study is to determine if the experimental vaccine is safe in people. A secondary goal is to assess how well the vaccine stimulates the immune system to produce antibodies and cellular immunity, in this case, focusing on the SARS spike protein. The spike protein protrudes from the virus' outer envelope and helps it bind to cells it infects.

SARS was spotted first in China in November 2002. The virus sickened 8,096 and killed 774 worldwide by July 2003, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). SARS was brought under control with classic public health techniques: epidemiological investigations,

patient isolations, quarantines of exposed people and stringent restrictions on travel.

The sudden appearance of SARS, its severity, and its ability to be spread far and fast by international travelers, spurred medical researchers. NIAID researchers developed the vaccine with unprecedented speed. Just 21 months passed from when international health officials recognized SARS as a new infectious disease to the opening of the NIAID human clinical vaccine trial. It often takes decades for scientists to develop a successful vaccine against an infectious disease.

"In the case of SARS, we have dramatically cut vaccine development time with powerful new tools from two different fields, molecular biology and information technology," says Anthony S. Fauci, M.D., director of NIAID.

Instead of using weakened or inactivated virus, which is typical for vaccine development, the new vaccine is composed of a small circular piece of DNA that encodes the viral spike protein. Scientists modified the DNA to minimize the risk of it combining with the SARS virus or other viruses of the SARS type, called coronaviruses.

Scientists expect that the DNA will direct human cells to produce proteins very similar to the SARS spike protein. The immune system should recognize these proteins as foreign and then mount a defense against them. If the vaccinated person ever encounters the actual SARS virus, his or her immune system will be primed to neutralize it.

"It is truly remarkable that less than two years ago we were facing an unknown global health threat, and now we are testing a promising vaccine that may help us to counter that threat should it re-emerge," Dr. Fauci said.

After SARS was identified as a disease, researchers worked hastily to identify the cause of the mysterious respiratory ailment and to develop therapies and vaccines. By April 2003, NIAID-funded researchers in Hong Kong were the first to show that SARS is a viral disease. They soon proved that a newly emerging coronavirus causes SARS. By May, an international collaboration of researchers had decoded the genetic sequence of the SARS coronavirus, opening many avenues of research to develop diagnostic tests, therapies and vaccines.

An NIAID team, lead by NIAID Vaccine Research Center Director Gary J. Nabel, M.D., used the available SARS coronavirus genomic information to develop a

vaccine based on the gene for the SARS spike protein. The vaccine performed very well in mice, reducing the levels of virus in the lungs of infected mice by more than a million-fold, Dr. Nabel and colleagues reported in *Nature* in March 2004.

“Two years ago, we didn’t know that this virus existed. Today, we begin clinical trials of a promising vaccine candidate. We owe the speed of this research to modern molecular genetics. The technology enables us rapidly to translate scientific discoveries into clinical interventions and improves our ability to battle these ever-evolving, highly lethal microbes,” says Dr. Nabel.

Under a contract with NIAID, Vical Inc. of San Diego, CA, is producing the SARS vaccine for the NIAID clinical trial. For more information on the SARS vaccine trial, phone the Vaccine Research Center’s toll free number 1-866 833-LIFE.

Chinese researchers began human testing of a SARS vaccine in May of this year. The Chinese vaccine trial uses an inactivated SARS virus vaccine developed through conventional vaccine technology.

While the bulk of SARS cases were in China, Hong Kong and Singapore, eventually cases also occurred in Canada, Europe and the United States, according to WHO. There were 27 probable SARS cases in the United States. No U.S. residents died of the disease, according to WHO.

NIAID is a component of the National Institutes of Health, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIAID supports basic and applied research to prevent, diagnose and treat infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, influenza, tuberculosis, malaria and illness from potential agents of bioterrorism. NIAID also supports research on transplantation and immune-related illnesses, including autoimmune disorders, asthma and allergies.

Reference: Z Yang et al. A DNA vaccine induces SARS coronavirus neutralization and protective immunity in mice. *Nature* 428:561-4 (2004). DOI: 10.1038/nature02463

U.S. DELIVERS FUNDS, BOOKS TO IMPROVE AFGHAN HEALTH

Health agency adds \$6 million in funding

The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is delivering new health-education talking books to Afghanistan and providing an additional \$6 million in health funding.

A December 12 press release says the agency has delivered 2,000 of the interactive, electronic health books first announced in August. The books are made with LeapPad(r), a learning system technology, and will provide health information to women who cannot read or write.

Under the Taliban rule, women were not allowed to go to school or see doctors; about 80 of the female population percent is illiterate. According to the release, Afghanistan has some of the world’s highest rates of maternal and early childhood death. One out of four Afghan children die before age 5, and there are 1,600 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.

The interactive books are designed to address these problems by providing an informational learning tool in both Dari and Pashto. HHS plans to send 20,000 of the books to Afghanistan.

HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson -- on his fourth trip to Afghanistan since September 2001 -- delivered the books in Kabul, and announced another \$6 million in health funding for the country.

“I hope that these books and the new funding will be a signal to the Afghan people that Americans will remain by their side as they grow as a nation,” he said.

The text of the HHS press release follows:
December 12, 2004

HHS Delivers Interactive Talking Book to Afghanistan
Secretary Thompson also announces \$6 million for Afghanistan

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN - HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson today announced the delivery of thousands of interactive women’s health books built with the LeapPad(r) learning system technology to Afghanistan and an additional \$6 million in aid to improve the health of the Afghan people.

Announced in August, and under development for nearly two years, the talking books provide important personal health information designed especially to help Afghan women who cannot read or write. Joining Secretary Thompson in delivering the LeapPad systems was Bhavin Shah, Director of New Business Development from LeapFrog Enterprises. The announcement was made at the Rabia Balki Hospital in downtown Kabul.

“Each time I visit Afghanistan I am touched by the warmth of the people and the hope in their eyes,” Secretary Thompson said. “It’s heartening to leave Afghans with this talking book, a lasting legacy, from the American people. I hope that these books and the new funding will be a signal to the Afghan people that Americans will remain by their side as they grow as a nation.”

Secretary Thompson delivered the books and announced the new funding during his fourth visit to Afghanistan since September 11, 2001. During previous visits, Secretary Thompson reviewed and evaluated the health needs of the Afghan people and helped target assistance to people throughout the country -- especially Afghan women, whose health care was virtually ignored under the Taliban. Based on his fact-finding trips, Secretary Thompson led the campaign to engage HHS as a financial and instructional supporter of the Rabia Balkhi Hospital and associated clinics that serve women in Afghanistan.

The additional \$6 million in fiscal year 2005 funding brings the total of HHS assistance to Afghanistan to nearly \$20 million since 9/11. In addition, HHS in cooperation with the Department of Defense, completely overhauled the Rabia Balki hospital in 2002. Once that was completed, in partnership with DoD, the U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs, and non-government partner International Medical Corps, HHS provided clinical and management training for hospital staff, and much-needed pharmaceuticals and supplies, and eventually established this partnership with LeapFrog Enterprises, Inc.

Developed jointly by HHS and LeapFrog Enterprises, Inc., the 42-page interactive books deliver important basic health information through state-of-the-art audio and point and touch technology. Books are available in both of Afghanistan’s two major languages, Dari and Pashto. Illiteracy is a common problem in Afghanistan where only half of the men and one in five women can read and write. The book allows users to point to pictures, then the book speaks to the user incorporating a literacy tool with health information. Information is conveyed in an

accessible story-like format that allows the reader to interact with recorded conversations conveyed in the book through pictures, audio, and in text form -- for those who can read.

“We are proud to be part of this unique outreach to the people of Afghanistan,” said Bhavin Shah, Director of New Business Development for LeapFrog. “Our LeapPad technology was designed from its inception to provide an engaging learning experience and it lends itself to unique opportunities, such as this important Afghan women’s health book. Knowledge is liberating, and with key health information in hand, we think this offering can make a difference in people’s lives in Afghanistan.”

This new Afghan talking book solution is easy to use and has been field tested to be physically rugged and educationally effective in providing important health information to the people of Afghanistan. As in most cultures, women are the health leaders in Afghan families, so the Afghan talking books were developed specifically for them. However, HHS and LeapFrog had to adapt the tools for a population that is predominately illiterate.

Prior to Afghanistan liberation, the Taliban refused to allow women and girls the opportunity to go to school or to see a doctor. Consequently, almost 80 percent of women cannot read or write, an estimated one in four children dies before his or her fifth birthday, and there are 1,600 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (as compared to the United States rate of 7.5 deaths per 100,000). By providing important public health and personal nutrition and hygiene information in this way, these ‘talking books’ will be an important tool in improving the overall health of Afghans.

The book presents more than 350 items of recorded information concerning 19 personal health subjects. Basic health information covered includes diet, childhood immunization, pregnancy, breastfeeding, sanitation and water boiling, treating injuries and burns, and preventing disease. The books convey everyday household situations, as well as information specific to child and reproductive health. LeapFrog’s patented LeapPad technology uses stories that convey basic health lessons to bring the information to life for the readers.

HHS will initially disseminate 2,000 books to Afghan households and primary health care centers through an initial distribution program used to evaluate both usability and behavior change measures. HHS will use the results of this initial distribution to determine the

best dissemination method for the 20,000 books that the United States is giving to the people of Afghanistan.

Note: All HHS press releases, fact sheets and other press materials are available at .

IRAQ ASKS FOR MORE U.N. ELECTION PERSONNEL

Elections will be held in January 2005, envoy says
By Judy Aita
Washington File United Nations Correspondent

United Nations -- Iraq has asked the United Nations to increase the number of its personnel in the country to bolster preparations for the election and help ensure that the elections are fair -- and are seen to be fair.

Addressing the Security Council December 13, Iraqi Ambassador Samir Sumaida'ie said that the current level of international U.N. staff in Iraq is "still not enough" and that his government is "concerned that this shortfall might adversely affect our preparedness for elections."

"The more U.N. personnel we have, the more supervision we can get, the more assurance there will be that elections are conducted properly," Sumaida'ie said. "We want not only to do the elections properly, but also to be seen to do it properly."

"The phrase 'as circumstances permit' should not become a mantra, repeated to justify insufficient presence on the ground in Iraq," Sumaida'ie said of the United Nations' criteria for sending staff to Iraq.

The United Nations has a total of 59 international staff in the country. Citing security concerns, Secretary-General Kofi Annan has limited the number of U.N. staff since the August 2003 bombing of its headquarters in Baghdad that claimed the lives of over 20 U.N. personnel -- including special envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello. Efforts to form a separate unit to provide security for the United Nations has been unsuccessful: the multinational force (MNF) in Iraq has been providing security in its absence.

U.N. Special Envoy for Iraq Ashraf Qazi said that a total of 25 U.N. staff members are expected to be arriving in the country shortly to help Iraq with the elections, including coordinating other international observers. The

United Nations is only helping the Iraqi Election Commission, not running the election, he noted.

Sumaida'ie said his government believes "that we have a legal and political obligation to the people of Iraq, an obligation we intend to discharge," to hold elections on January 30, 2005, despite security concerns.

"The great majority of the people of Iraq want and expect them [elections] to take place as planned, to postpone them might be seen as giving in to the terrorists whose goal is to wreck the political process and prevent elections from ever taking place," the Iraqi ambassador said.

Sumaida'ie also said that there is no reason to believe that "any sizeable segment of Iraq's population" will heed calls for a boycott of the elections. He said election boycotts have failed in other countries and predicted that Iraq will prove no different. "Given the opportunity, Iraqis will turn out in large numbers to participate in the first free election of their lives," he said.

"It is not the calls for boycotts that worry us," Sumaida'ie said. "It is the campaign of intimidation. We need to protect individual citizens from the threats made against them if they go to vote. We have to make sure the environment is secure for them. That is what is engaging the government at the moment."

The Iraqi envoy addressed an open meeting of the Security Council not only to urge the United Nations to increase its presence and commitment inside Iraq but also to defend his government's stand against the terrorists in Falluja and emphasize the need for the international community to help in Iraq.

The ambassador criticized the United Nations for using video conferences, telephone calls from outside Iraq or letters "which inevitably find their way to the press" as a means of working with Iraqi officials instead of being physically present in the country.

"We believe that, not only elections preparations but the vital humanitarian and developmental work can be greatly enhanced through direct contacts in Iraq between U.N. officials and their counterparts in the IIG [Iraqi Interim government] and the provinces," he said.

"There is a dearth of U.N. workers even in northern and southern Iraq, despite relative peace and stability there," he said.

Sumaida'ie urged the U.N. to increase its presence in those areas, saying they are areas "in which progress should be possible quite quickly."

The ambassador said critics of the Falluja assault on terrorists "offer no alternative which had not already been tried for months to no avail."

The Iraqi interim government's goal, he said, is to "deprive terrorists bent on destroying the transition process of any safe havens in Iraq. No responsible government can do anything else."

He said that 203 major weapons caches, 11 bomb factories, and three slaughter houses for captives and hostages were found in Falluja.

Reporting on behalf of the 30 countries providing 150,000 personnel to the multinational force in Iraq, U.S. Ambassador John Danforth said that "security for the U.N. in Iraq will be a key issue for some time."

The MNF understands U.N. concerns about the safety of its personnel and "is committed to providing security for the growing U.N. staff in Iraq," the U.S. ambassador said.

"As we provide that security, we urge the U.N. to put additional personnel on the ground," Danforth said. "Additional U.N. support is essential to the future of Iraq, and especially to the success of next month's elections."

The U.S. ambassador said that several governments indicated they intend to provide troops for a separate security unit to protect U.N. staff, and he expressed the hope that the unit will be operational in time for the elections.

"We urge in the strongest possible terms donors to step forward with donations of forces and finances," he said.

Danforth said that Iraqi security forces currently being trained by the MNF total 116,240.

Qazi, the U.N. special envoy for Iraq, told the Security Council that the United Nations' staff sees "a widespread desire amongst Iraqis to participate in the elections" and find political solutions to political problems, but some important segments of the population still feel alienated from the political transition.

"To its credit," Qazi said, "the interim government has made efforts to reach out to alienated elements and is continuing to do so. It needs every encouragement to increase its efforts in this direction."

Please Note: Most texts and transcript mentioned in the U.S. Mission Daily Bulletin are available via our homepage: www.usmission.ch

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